

CHURCHES



JONATHAN WIGGS/GLOBE STAFF

Duxbury resident Priscilla Harris, 96, recalls visiting a meeting at Ashdod Chapel as a young girl, and being frightened by what she saw.

Waiting for the end

Duxbury Convention has been looking heavenward for 100 years

By Julie Masis
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

DUXBURY — Few Duxbury residents have been inside the little white clapboard building near the cemetery on Keene Street, which is locked for most of the year. Tall wooden shutters, each with a green cross, keep the curious from peeking in the windows. Two big locks secure the front door. A sign on the front of the building reads "Ashdod Chapel, 1876."

It's a peaceful, nothing-happens-here scene on a leafy street, a picture of calm and quiet in suburbia.

But on the morning of Sept. 24, 1909, about 300 people were crammed so tightly into this building they could barely stir. They were watching a clock in the front of the chapel room; below the clock, a sign said "Jesus is coming soon. Get ready." They held the conviction that the Earth's crust would peel off at 10 a.m., and that all the wicked people in the world would perish.

That week a hundred years ago, there were three front-page stories in The Boston Daily Globe about Adventists in West Duxbury who quit their jobs, sold their businesses, and gave away

their worldly possessions because they believed the world would end on Sept. 24 during their Duxbury Convention.

The Boston Post and even The New York Times also sent reporters, and the Globe ran photographs of women excitedly throwing their arms toward the heavens. One account said that when the clock struck 10, the worshipers stopped singing and everyone waited, breathlessly, for the end.

When nothing happened, believers decided the apocalypse must have been postponed — first until 6 p.m. the next day, then until the following year. And, finally, indefinitely: Remnants of the same religious group are gathering in West Duxbury again this weekend to pray in the same chapel — only this time, no one will have gone to the extremes of preparing for the Second Coming, as their predecessors did a century ago.

"We still believe that the Lord Jesus is coming back to Earth, but we don't know when," said Gertrude Haynes, 77, the wife of the president of the Free Christian Society, the evangelical group that has organized the twice-annual Duxbury Convention for more than 100 years. "No man knows the day or the hour."

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**ADVENTISTS AT THE WEST DUXBURY CAMPGROUND
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Taking of a Big Collection.

Newspaper accounts 100 years ago described the fervent belief of people attending the Duxbury Convention that the end was near.

304

It's a smaller gathering nowadays, one that does not draw the sort of attention it did in its heyday. But the convention, the purpose of which is spiritual renewal, has changed very little in 100 years, church leaders say. Every year, in May and September, members come from around New England to spend a few days in Duxbury, staying in the modest dormitory buildings on church property across the street.

Pam Woleyko, who lives across the street from the chapel, said she has never seen what's inside the building. But twice a year she hears people singing late into the night and their wake-up bell ringing in the morning.

She sees the women, usually in long dresses, crossing the road to go to church. Then a few days later, they're gone, and the chapel is locked up again.

"They are very family" oriented, said Woleyko. "They look very old-fashioned."

Richard and Debbie Gallagher, who also live across the street from the chapel, said they sometimes see society president Paul Haynes when he comes from New Hampshire to check on the property and do chores.

Debbie Gallagher has visited the dormitories, and described them as "bunk rooms that did not look very comfortable." She said when members of the church are in town she will see some of them playing ball in the yard and walking their children in strollers.

"They're good neighbors," Richard Gallagher said.

But none of the members live in Duxbury, and few residents here say they knew about the gathering at the chapel that drew the spotlight on their town a century ago.

Priscilla Harris did. The 96-year-old, who lives nearby, said she once visited the chapel when she was a little girl. She was frightened, she said, when she saw worshipers talking in tongues and falling to the floor.

"As a child, I wondered why they didn't pick up the poor woman off the floor — they were a weird group of people" then, Harris recalled. "They stayed pretty much to themselves."

That was years after what was to have been the end of the world.

According to newspaper accounts, by Sept. 25, 1909, worshipers were exhausted from days and nights of continual prayer. At least one woman fainted. Eventually, people started to leave, but some had nothing to go back to. One man had sold his horse. Another had cashed in his furniture, expecting that he would not need it again. A third man quit a good job.

The New York Times reported that a man from Watertown, fearing the closing

doom, killed himself, "his pockets . . . filled with newspaper clippings relating to predictions by members of the Church."

Not much is known about what ultimately happened to those fervent believers who vested everything in the Second Coming that never came. Years later, the church would become known only by its 1902 incorporated name, The Free Christian Society. In news stories in 1909, it was referred to as The Latter Reign of the Apostolic Church, and members were called Adventists and Triune Immersionists.

Haynes, a retired pastor from Swanzey, N.H., who took the helm after the death of his father, Joseph, said he does not know why the name was changed.

"I never heard the name Latter Reign of the Apostolic Church, but then I'm not 100 years old," he said in a phone interview.

Haynes said the society is a nondenominational, Pentecostal group with no more than 80 members around New England. It does not advertise itself in the community because it does not have the facilities to accommodate large groups of people, he said. It has no office or website, and members find out about its activities mostly through word of mouth.

In addition to literal interpretation of

the Bible and the Second Coming, members believe in miraculous healings and talking in tongues, when the Holy Spirit uses individuals as a vessel for prophetic utterances, said Haynes.

Approximately 50 regularly attend the Duxbury Convention, drawn to the gathering and its old chapel time and again in part because it preserves an unusually old-fashioned atmosphere, members say.

Going into the dormitories feels like stepping back in time; Haynes said because the buildings, which have names like Bethel House, are open for only a few days a year, they get little wear and tear. They have no toilets, showers, or central heating. Each room is provided with a wash bowl and a pitcher. Church members wake up together when the brass bell rings, and eat together in the cafeteria.

"The spirit of God is there," said Whitman resident Margaret Vaughn, 84, who said she has been attending the convention for 51 years.

Like her fellow Free Christians and other Adventists around the world today, she said she believes in, and is waiting for, the end of the world.

"We don't know when it's going to happen. It could happen this year. It could happen today."



Priscilla Harris (foreground) attended a gathering at Ashdod Chapel when she was a child. Shirley Rousseau is a relative of the church's original pastor.

JONATHAN WIGGS/GLOBE STAFF